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OO RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHTL #0626/01 1871052
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY TALLINN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8805
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW IMMEDIATE 2420
RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA IMMEDIATE 2736
RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS IMMEDIATE 6508
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RUENAAA/SECNAV WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO IMMEDIATE 1119
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TALLINN 000626

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/06/2016
TAGS: [NATO](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [RS](#) [LG](#) [LH](#) [EN](#)
SUBJECT: ESTONIA RETHINKING AIR POLICING POLICY

Classified By: DCM Jeff Goldstein for reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

11. (C) Summary. Air Policing (AP) remains one of the top military/security priorities for the GOE representing, as it does, the only concrete security contribution Estonia receives from NATO membership. Due to repeated Russian incursions into Estonian airspace over the years, the GOE feels that the current situation is no longer tenable and inadequate for Estonia's mid to long-term needs. The Ministry of Defense (MOD) therefore produced an internal AP report assessing the current system and possible permanent long-term solutions. While preferring to have a NATO solution, the MOD Report outlines several other possible alternatives: bilateral, regional, and unilateral. Once the Report is approved, it will be put forward for governmental review with a decision timetable set for 2008/2009. While a consensus is far from being formed, noticeable divisions are already apparent within the MOD and MFA between those who want Estonia to develop its own AP capacity and those who believe it to be prohibitively expensive. Depending on its eventual course of action, the GOE's decision on AP could have a real and substantive knock-on effect on Estonia's contributions to NATO and other out-of-area operations. End Summary.

THE STATUS QUO

12. (SBU) Since Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia lack aircraft to protect their own airspace, NATO has been providing an interim 24/7 AP for Baltic airspace since 2004. The current AP regime is set to last till the end of 2007. NATO's 24/7 AP coverage continues to be one of the GOE's highest priorities. However, the September 2005 crash of a Russian SU-27 in Lithuania strengthened sentiment within the GOE that a permanent AP solution is needed to overcome the current system's shortcomings. As GOE officials have often reminded us in our meetings (before and after the Lithuania crash), the NATO AP squadron based in Siauliai is so far away that the NATO planes are not able to arrive before Russian planes that have violated Estonian airspace are long gone.

PROBLEM WITH STATUS QUO ONE: RESPONSE TIME

13. (C) The GOE has recorded 53 air violations since October 2003. Forty-four of the incursions have taken place near Vaindloo Island and lasting no more than two minutes. The most serious incursion took place in September 2003 which

lasted over 20 minutes. (Comment. Since Estonia's membership in NATO, no overtly hostile incursions have taken place, though a wide range of military, bomber, and transport aircraft have committed air incursions. We believe that the majority of these air incursions are not malicious in nature, but more as a result of old Soviet habits in which many Russian pilots cut across the small strip of Estonian air space as they did when it was once a part of the former USSR. End Comment)

¶4. (C) Notwithstanding the short duration of the majority of these incursions, the GOE and general public remain highly sensitive over air space violations. While admitting that the threat is minimal, GOE officials have expressed their unhappiness over NATO's current inability to stop these incursions. As Miko Haljas, MFA Director for Security Policy and Arms Control, said, "If the U.S. started to violate Canada's airspace, I'm sure the Canadians would know an American invasion was extremely unlikely, but would still not find the behavior acceptable." Current NATO AP aircraft are not able to respond in time against these short incursions, nor can they remain for long periods of time patrolling the Estonian border due to fuel constraints. The GOE has also pointed out that these shortcomings would also be a problem should terrorists attempt to use a civilian aircraft as a weapon against civilian, military, or governmental targets in Estonia.

PROBLEM WITH STATUS QUO TWO: AFTER 2007, THEN WHAT?

¶5. (C) The GOE has also repeatedly expressed its discomfort

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over the lack of certainty regarding NATO AP rotations after 2007. The GOE is well aware that some NATO Allies (i.e., Denmark, UK, etc.) want to do away with NATO AP altogether due to the low threat probability and/or change the current alert-based posture to a threat-based system in order to free up limited European resources. The discussions emanating from some in the Department of Defense who share a similar view has also been followed closely by the GOE.

¶6. (C) While preferring an alert-based AP system, the GOE has gradually come to support the current NATO AP Policy Review document, even though it contains language protecting OSD's desire for a "threat-based" AP scheme. However, the GOE is concerned by the lack of progress in adopting this compromise document. The delay has only added to the GOE's sense of uncertainty over NATO's AP presence after 2007, giving more ammunition to those in the GOE advocating a home-grown solution.

¶7. (SBU) The GOE understands the cost to NATO allies of contributing to Baltic AP. In the GOE's eyes, however, Estonia has worked hard to fulfill its NATO obligations to transform its military and ensure interoperability through steady increases in defense spending (which is on track to reach NATO's 2% of GDP target by 2010) and proactive out-of-area military contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan. "AP is the one visible and tangible benefit of NATO membership," said Sander Soone, MFA Director General for Political Affairs, "that we can bring to the public to help justify not only our military reforms and spending, but also our troop contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan." Currently, Estonia has nearly 10% of its land forces serving in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia.

ESTONIAN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF AP

¶8. (SBU) Dissatisfied with the current AP regime's shortcomings, the GOE mandated the MOD to produce an

internal AP analysis report. While we have not seen an actual copy of the report, the MOD provided an overview to the DATT and Poloff on June 5.

¶9. (C) The report does not make any final recommendation, nor has it yet been approved by the government as a whole. In all likelihood, the GOE will not make a final decision until at least 2008. As it currently stands, the report lays out several possible scenarios: modifying and making the current NATO AP coverage permanent; a bilateral or regional arrangement for AP coverage; and a unilateral/domestic response with Estonian aircraft. The objective is for the MOD to devote 8-9% of its defense budget by 2018 to AP whatever the GOE decides. Though some monies will have to be siphoned from other areas (i.e., operations), the MOD is confident that due to the steady increase of defense spending and the projected economic growth rate (presently close to 10%) it will not have to divert funds from other areas.

¶10. (SBU) As part of the MOD's long term plan, it will upgrade Amari airbase. Estonia has received confirmation of NATO Capability Package funding for the initial phase of Amari's upgrade (\$28 million). The GOE will provide an additional \$40 million (though not all the funding has yet been approved). The MOD's timetable for the completion of Amari's upgrade is 2018. The MOD envisions Amari having the capacity to base up to a dozen F-16s and two to three C-17s. The upgraded Amari airbase is planned to feature prominently in whatever Estonia's AP policy is.

SCENARIO ONE: NATO AIRCRAFT BASED IN ESTONIA?

¶11. (C) GOE officials have all agreed that their first choice is to have NATO AP coverage made permanent but with some key modifications. The report insists on the continuation of 24/7 coverage and recommends that rotations be longer (one figure mentioned in our briefing was six months) and involve a core group of NATO allies willing to contribute permanently. Poland, Denmark, Germany, Norway, and the United States were all mentioned as possible

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contributors. Finally, the report recommends having some of the AP aircraft actually based in Estonia at Amari airbase in order to deal with the short incursions and possible renegades.

SCENARIO TWO: BILATERAL AND/OR REGIONAL AP ARRANGEMENT?

¶12. (C) The report also explores the possibility of bilateral and/or regional agreements. One scenario would involve Poland extending its AP coverage to Lithuania with Finland expanding its AP coverage to include Estonia and Latvia. (However, the GOE has reservations over the practicality of an agreement with a non-NATO member such as Finland.) The Estonians have not yet approached the Poles or Finns to discuss this idea. Another option is for all three Balts to pool resources to procure and maintain aircraft. While the report has been shown to both Lithuania and Latvia, no serious discussions on this subject have taken place.

SCENARIO THREE: AN ESTONIAN AIR FORCE?

¶13. (C) The most controversial option is for Estonia to acquire its own aircraft. The MOD believes that 2018 is realistically the earliest date the GOE can afford this. The report outlines a number of options for Estonia to acquire aircraft. The most feasible plan is for Estonia to acquire second-hand aircraft from other NATO allies for free (i.e., recently decommissioned) or at a reduced price. There has been some informal talk in the MOD and MFA about

acquiring some of Sweden's aging Grippens. Some mid- to senior-level MOD and MFA officials still even mention the Javelin as a possibility. (The Javelin is a U.S. designed aircraft not yet in production designed principally to deal with renegades.)

¶14. (C) In our meetings with the MFA and MOD, a number of officials have openly expressed their preference for "Estonian pilots in Estonian aircraft to patrol Estonian skies." MOD Policy Planning Director Sven Sakkov admitted that even with its own aircraft, Estonia could not mount a serious defense of its airspace against Russia but that the purpose of Estonian aircraft is mainly to act as physical deterrence against further Russian incursions. The Finnish model (of shadowing their Russian counterparts in the air to escort, monitor, and photograph any and all Russian incursions) is the example GOE officials most often cite.

¶15. (C) Comment. We believe most of the GOE officials involved understand that procuring fighter aircraft would be a bad use of limited military resources and diminish Estonia's contributions to the GWOT and NATO operations. The fact that they are willing to consider such a solution indicates how important, psychologically and politically, the Air Policing issue is here in Estonia. It is important that this aspect be kept squarely in mind as debate continues on what to do about the NATO Air Police Mission after 2007.

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